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James C. Schaap
Dordt College

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New Hope at Christmas

James Schaap

Something happened way back when, a crime long gone from the memories of anyone in downtown Hawarden today. It probably never made the *Sioux City Journal*, but everyone in town, circa 1895, had to know because when the mighty fall, the crash is as momentous as it is memorable.

A saintly man of high standing, among the pastor's closest friends, was caught with his hands in the till, grabbing a fortune more than a few buffalo nickels. That good man's fall affected a precocious little girl for the rest of her life, a child who became a novelist and never forgot.

If there's a memory of what happened in Hawarden, it belongs only to those who read the work of the town's world-class novelist, Ruth Suckow, the pastor's daughter, herself long gone.

Ruth Suckow grew up in Hawarden in the 1890s, a brand new village of men and women who'd staked claims in the last section of Iowa unsettled by white folks, its northwest corner. They were pioneers brimming with new hope, which became the title of one of Suckow's novels, a novel in which Hawarden can't be missed.

There's no thief in Suckow's novel *New Hope*, but he's there in *John Wood Case*, a study of how a community of saints behaves when a one of its own falls.

Suckow never forgot that village story because she suffered it herself. Her father was not the sinner, but something in a ten-year old child was broken when she watched a good, good man fall from grace. That fall, the fall from innocence to experience, is a fall we all suffer. We all grow up.

New Hope chronicles the toughest passage any of us ever takes when we leave our childhoods in some dusty attic. *New Hope* is about childhood and innocence—and leaving it behind.

But there's a Christmas moment in *New Hope* that's perfectly incandescent. Little Clarence Miller is head-over-heels in love in a second-grade way with Desire

Greenwood, the pastor's daughter.

It's Christmas Eve, and the church Mary-and-Joseph-and-the-babe pageant slowly grinds to a halt for a story they all know, even the kids.

"For behold I bring you good tidings—"

Little Clarence is wiggling in his seat in the silent night of that church, Rev. Cunningham reading the old, old story. Here's how Ruth Suckow describes old Hawarden and all of us—

For the first time, this was not just a reading from the scriptures that came at a certain point in the program. Meaning shone from the words, and shone around them, in the scent of the evergreens and the unsteady candlelight—surrounded by the white silent glitter of great snowfields, great smooth billowing acres of winter snow, Clarence felt the awesomeness of that shining immensity that lay all around them outside the windows. But he and Delight were here together, in the midst of their own community—. . . and from their happy closeness, holding their presents, the meaning of the words spread out to everyone in church. It was true, Clarence thought with joyous wonder—he was happy, he hated nobody, not even Wilie Schnitts. He felt 'on earth peace, good will toward men.'"

Just so you know—life doesn't stay that good for little Clarence. After all, like all of us, he grows up.

And so did a little girl named Ruth Suckow, more than a century ago, just down the road in Hawarden, where things never really sparkled again once she learned, at an age no older than Clarence and Desire, that life wasn't as sweet as the candy in the paper bag the church gave out to kids on Christmas Eve.

No matter. The incandescence of this holiday season still makes us all children, don't you think?

A certain glow of lights, just a few bars of "The First Noel," our children's or grandchildren's eyes, an old barn with a manger—all we need is two or three images and just like that, brimming with new hope, we're there, with Clarence, at Christmas.